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Time to end Doe Run's serial contamination cycle.

By: Editorial Board

R.J. Matson/Post-Dispatch

The Doe Run Company has been operating a giant lead smelter in Herculaneum for decades. For just as long, elevated lead levels have been found in people, properties and roads around it.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources have a duty to protect citizens from that serial contamination. They repeatedly have failed to fulfill their obligation.

The latest evidence came this week. Tests conducted since July found unacceptably high lead levels on all or parts of 129 properties within a mile of the smelter. Nearly a third of the 372 yards and lots examined were found to be contaminated. Most already had been cleaned up once in the past nine years.

Where did all that lead come from? A good bet would be the dozens of trucks hauling lead concentrate to the smelter. The EPA reported this month that Doe Run has failed to comply with an agreement to prevent contamination from those trucks.

We're not talking expensive high-tech efforts. Doe Run was supposed to wash and inspect trucks to ensure that loads were covered and tailgates were secured.

EPA inspectors found trucks with holes in their cargo beds — 18 in one truck alone — and in load coverings. They found trucks that hadn't been adequately washed to remove lead dust. They found company employees and contractors who allowed trucks with those obvious deficiencies to be loaded with lead and driven on public roads.

Drivers told the EPA that when company inspectors refused to load their trucks at one mine, they simply drove down the road to another Doe Run facility where they'd be loaded up and sent on their way.

At the company's Brushy Creek Mine in southeast Missouri, a Doe Run inspector who was supposed to be checking for problems instead got upset when one truck was turned away for safety violations. He complained that the driver "was just trying to make a dollar," EPA officials reported.

When federal officials released their report about recontaminated properties this week, Doe Run tried to minimize the findings. It said just 29 properties were contaminated, not 129 as cited by the EPA. The EPA counted a property as being contaminated if any part had excessive lead levels. Doe Run counted it only if the average of all samples taken was above 400 parts of lead per million.

But children don't play in averages; they play in yards and streets. High lead levels on any part of a property mean people — especially kids — may be exposed to poison.

Doe Run is playing a numbers game with the contaminated properties. It's playing a delaying game with the report on truck inspections. The company was supposed to file a written response by Oct. 20. Instead, it asked for another two months to study the document.

It's time to quit playing games.

If Doe Run spent as much money protecting public health as it does on public relations, the recontamination wouldn't have occurred. The company has signed three different agreements to prevent roadway lead contamination. It's failed to live up to them.

Doe Run has operated as if it had a license to poison southeast Missouri. It doesn't. Agreements haven't kept Doe Run from operating like Poison Inc. Perhaps heavy fines and stiff legal sanctions will.

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